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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 002542

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FOR NEA/ELA AND DRL/NESCA
NSC FOR PASCUAL AND KUTCHA-HELBLING

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [EG](#)
SUBJECT: ACTIVISTS CRITICIZE THE GOE, CALL FOR NEW U.S.
POLICIES

REF: CAIRO 2297

Classified By: Ambassador Margaret Scobey for reason 1.4 (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On December 13, civil society activists and a political oppositionist discussed with Codel Dorgan Egypt's current political and economic problems, and the future of U.S. policy toward Egypt. Former independent parliamentarian Anwar Essmat El-Sadat asserted that U.S. aid to the GOE convinces the Egyptian public that the U.S. favors the regime over the population. Opposition Wafd party parliamentarian Mohammed El-Sherdy criticized the GOE's political corruption and called for the U.S. to stop backing the regime with aid. Cairo University Professor Abdel-Monem Al-Mashat asserted that the U.S. should not fear change in Egypt because the status quo with its economic deprivation and political marginalization is riskier. Human rights activist Engi Haddad opined that the U.S. focus on political rights ignores the economic plight of tens of millions of Egyptians. She lamented the lack of rule of law and transparency in Egypt. Human rights lawyer Hafez Abu Seada called for the GOE to award legal status to more civil society groups, and Coptic newspaper editor Youssef Sidhom described discrimination against Egyptian Christians. Participants debated the strength of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). End summary.

Activists Discuss Political and Economic Problems

¶2. (C) Anwar Essmat El-Sadat, former independent parliamentarian and current chairman of the El-Sadat Association for Social Development and Welfare, described Egypt as a "police state" where it is difficult to practice "real democracy." He doubted this internal political situation would change while Mubarak remains in power. Sadat asserted that Egyptians believe the U.S. cares more about the regime than the Egyptian people, and he attributed the Egyptian public's negative view of the U.S. to this perception, despite nearly three decades of extensive U.S. economic and military aid.

¶3. (C) Mohammed Mustafa El-Sherdy, a parliamentarian from the opposition Wafd party, asserted that the GOE "thrives on manipulation" in order to preserve the status quo. He recounted how the GOE stole the 2000 parliamentary elections from him, and announced that his opponent was victorious although El-Sherdy clearly won the vote in his district. El-Sherdy asserted that the GOE raises the specter of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) coming to power in order to scare the U.S. into maintaining its support for the status quo. El-Sherdy complained that the regime has cracked down on liberals as part of this strategy, in the face of limited U.S. opposition. He charged that U.S. aid backfires because it stabilizes a regime that the Egyptian people hate. "We need you to stop backing the regime," he implored. In

response to Senator Conrad's question regarding what message the Codel should pass to President Mubarak, El-Sherdy suggested a broad emphasis on political reform and free and fair elections, as opposed to focusing on individuals, such as Ayman Nour.

14. (C) Professor Abdel-Monem Al-Mashat, Chairman of Cairo University's Political Science Department, opined that the U.S. has been "nervous" about changing the status quo in Egypt because of a belief that the present situation is preferable to an unknown future. He stated, "I believe the status quo is more risky than the unknown," and pointed toward current poverty, vast economic disparities and political marginalization of the opposition as dangerous factors. He called for the new U.S. administration to reject the argument that the status quo is beneficial, and to press the GOE to enact political and economic reforms.

15. (C) Engi Haddad, Director of the Afro-Egyptian Human Rights Organization and the Egyptian Accountability Center, told the Codel that corruption causes the Egyptian public to feel "disenfranchised," without having any stake in the country's future. According to Haddad, the emphasis on political rights in U.S. policy and Congressional aid conditionality ignores Egyptians' preoccupation with basic needs, such as food and shelter. "People are concerned about their next meal, not about freedom of speech. Egyptians don't understand why economic aid could be blocked because of human rights concerns," she said.

16. (C) Haddad alleged that the GOE is losing its ability to satisfy the masses' need for food, and attributed Mubarak's

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low popularity to this failure. "Mubarak was the most popular man in Egypt in 2002," she asserted, "but now his approval rating is only about 28 percent." Haddad called for the GOE to implement the United Nations Anti-Corruption Convention that it signed, and she stressed the importance of judicial independence to promote the rule of law, and free and fair elections. She emphasized that the next U.S. administration should continue to promote democratic reforms.

Answering Senator Dorgan's question regarding GOE knowledge of the Codel's meeting with activists, Haddad asserted that Egyptian State Security was aware of each individual's participation and would call every one of them to ask what was discussed.

17. (C) Hafez Abu Seada, Secretary-General of the Egyptian Organization of Human Rights, noted the importance of U.S. support for human rights and opposition groups, and lamented that many such groups do not enjoy legal status in Egypt. He said that his organization was not able to operate legally until 2003, although it was founded in 1985. Abu Seada told the Codel that the GOE uses the Emergency Law and the current NGO law to restrict the activities of civil society and political opposition groups. "We're not asking for free and fair elections tomorrow," he stated, suggesting that Egyptians had learned from Hamas' 2006 electoral victory. Abu Seada criticized the lack of transparency and the absence of the rule of law that allows corrupt GOE practices, such as the Minister of Housing increasing real estate prices to benefit his own privately-held company.

18. (C) Youssef Sidhom, the editor of "Al-Watany," an independent Coptic-oriented weekly newspaper, told the Codel that Egypt's Coptic Christian minority suffers from legislative discrimination restricting church construction, and societal and official discrimination limiting employment opportunities and Copts' role in elected bodies. He called for the U.S. to pressure the GOE to improve human rights and religious freedom.

¶9. (C) Professor Al-Mashat predicted that Egyptians would never vote for the Muslim Brotherhood in large numbers. "We are not extremists," he proclaimed. Anwar El-Sadat minimized the MB's political strength and support, but called for the GOE to include the MB in the political process, instead of simply arresting MB members. Engi Haddad disagreed with the assessment of the MB as weak, and opined that through the MB's outreach to the poor, the organization is capable of mobilizing large segments of the population. Haddad expressed concern that the MB emphasizes the importance of an "Islamic Nation," above the interests of Egypt. "They are Muslim before they are Egyptian," she charged. Mohammed El-Sherdy described the MB's strength as emanating from its religious dedication and its ability to lead a small, devoted number of Egyptians, while the majority of the population remains politically apathetic. Hafez Abu Seada told the Codel that the MB is able to connect directly with the population through its charity committees, while opposition parties stay in their offices, estranged from the public.

¶10. (U) Codel Dorgan did not clear this message.

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